Walking the Straight Path

Constancy, Renewal & the Contemporary Muslim

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INTRODUCTION

Praise be to Allah; we praise Him, seek His forgiveness, and turn to Him in repentance. We seek refuge with Him from the evils of our souls and the evils of our deeds. Whomever Allah guides, none can misguide, and whomever Allah leads astray, none can guide. I bear witness that there is no god but Allah alone without partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger.

I was once asked by some Muslims in California to participate in a conference that they were holding. They suggested the topic: "Approaches to Re-examining Contemporary Islamic Issues". I presented to them a talk by telephone. Soon thereafter, I was requested by a group at the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur to present a lecture on renewal in Islamic Law. After presenting both lectures, I realized that their topics overlapped to a considerable degree and I decided to bring the two lectures together in the body of a larger work.

Muslims in our times – especially those engaged in Islamic work – have to cope with the challenges of a changing world. Though this has been the case for quite a while, the rate of change is increasing by the day. This is being further accelerated by the encroachment of globalization and its promise of bringing the entire world under a single political, economic, cultural, and media superstructure. Then we have all the political, military, and security ramifications of September 11. The world is passing through a period of deep political and ideological change.

The Muslim world is affected by the general changes taking place on a global level, for better or for worse.

A while back, some Islamic workers used to categorically condemn any participation in politics. They rejected the idea of Muslims participating in parliament or the idea of trying to affect things from within. However, it soon became apparent to them that they had no choice but to participate, and now we see those same people endorsing candidates and political parties. They realized that this was necessary in order to confront evil with good.

Likewise, in the past, some Islamists sought to take up arms against their governments. Possibly the earliest example of this took place in Syria. The tragic consequences of that misguided effort are well known. Much innocent blood was spilt. A tremendous number of lives were lost and a massive amount of property was destroyed. There was a subsequent clampdown on Islamic activity and many liberties that the Muslims had

previously enjoyed were lost. Similar attempts in other countries like Egypt met with similar unfortunate consequences. It became clear that these misguided efforts had to be stopped and that the approaches being employed to deal with the problems facing the Muslims needed to be rectified.

Other Islamic workers rejected mass media. They warned against the evils and the dangers of television. Alas, they ultimately found themselves compelled to accept the fact that such things were here to stay and could not be ignored. They realized that they were going to have to use the media to call people to Islam and give the people a wholesome alternative to the filth that they were watching. In this way, the television and other mass media options became means of disseminating Islam. These means were understood to take the ruling of the ends for which they were employed. They were not to be regarded as good and evil in and of themselves.

CHAPTER ONE
Guidance to the Straight Path

We shall start off our discussion by exploring the critical matter of guidance. In his daily prayers, a Muslim asks Allah: "Guide us to the Straight Path." This is a weighty supplication full of meaning. It has been prescribed for us by none other than our Lord who, in His infinite wisdom, has commanded us to repeat it in every unit of prayer that we offer. It is a verse of the opening chapter of the Qur'ân, and our prayers are not valid if we fail to recite this chapter therein. No other chapter of the Qur'ân can be recited as an alternative. We can be certain that there is great wisdom behind this command.

There are four aspects to this guidance that we are asking for:

The first is for us to be blessed with the ability to arrive at knowledge of what is good and how to attain it and knowledge of what is evil and how to avoid it. Allah has blessed us with our five senses and our faculties of reason so we can learn and come to know these things.

Allah says: "And he taught Adam the names of all things." Allah has given Adam and all of his descendants the ability to think and learn and to understand in a way that He has given to nothing else in Creation. Our Lord created everything and gave each the guidance that it needed. He guided the animals to instinctively know where to seek sustenance and what to eat. The complex instinctive knowledge that Allah has bestowed on some insects is astonishing and makes us appreciate the greatness of Allah's creative power. Still, humanity has certainly been blessed in knowledge far more than anything else in creation has. We have the ability to attain guidance and to know right from wrong.

The necessity of being able to know right from wrong is why Islamic Law holds only a person of sound mind accountable.

The second aspect of this guidance is general guidance. Allah sent his Messengers and revealed His books to humanity. The Qur'ân is the last of these books. This is why Allah says: "For all people there was a guide." and said: "Verily this Qur'ân guides to what is most proper." The Messengers were these guides and the books were their guidance that they brought, with the Qur'ân being the final, all-encompassing manifestation of this guidance.

This general guidance is something that we can be shown. Allah says to His Messenger (peace be upon him): "Truly you guide to a path that is straight." This means that the Prophet (peace be upon him) guides the people by teaching them the Qur'ân and Sunnah that were revealed to him.

However, there is another aspect of guidance that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was not empowered to offer, for Allah says: "You do not guide whom you love, but Allah guides whom He pleases."

This brings us to the third type of guidance. It is a specific form of guidance for the righteous people who worship Allah. It is guidance to Allah's Straight Path.

Allah refers to this specific guidance in many verses of the Qur'ân. He says: "They were guided to a good word and they were guided to the praiseworthy path."

He says: "Those are the ones whom Allah guided, so by their guidance be led."

He says: "Those who strive on Our behalf, we will guide them to Our paths."

This is the guidance of inspiring the heart and of divinely ordained success. It is as if Allah takes someone by the hand and walks her down the Straight Path. Some scholars have said: "The signs to be found in Allah's Creation are too numerous to count, but few people benefit from those signs." How many of those who look upon the heavens and the Earth never attain guidance? But Allah guides whom He pleases.

It should be clear to us that this particular form of guidance is not an all-or-nothing matter. A person can attain this guidance a little at a time. This is why Allah says: "Those who strive on Our behalf, we will guide them to Our paths."

This verse shows us how guidance can come a little at a time. This is because we will not strive for the sake of Allah in the first place unless we had guidance to begin with. However, this verse tells us that to the degree of our striving we will receive even further guidance.

Allah also says: "Those who believe and work righteous deeds, their Lord will guide them by their faith.." This means that they are already believing and performing acts of righteousness, but from this they will be brought to a higher and more complete level of guidance.

Allah says: “Those who believe and work righteous deeds, we will admit them among the righteous people.” First, they work righteousness. Then Allah makes such work easy and effortless for them so that it becomes second nature to them.

This guidance starts off as something requiring effort. It then advances to become something natural and easy. A person who starts praying the night prayer finds it, at first, difficult to wake up in the middle of the night. However, with perseverance, it becomes so much a part of that person’s life that he cannot feel comfortable and content without it.

Allah says: “O you who believe, fear Allah and believe in His Messenger. He will grant you guarantees of His mercy and provide for you light to walk by. And He will forgive you. And Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.”

In this verse, Allah first calls us to faith and to fear Him and believe in His Messenger. These are all forms of guidance in and of themselves. Then, if we act upon this guidance, the fruits of doing so will be further guidance illuminating our path, showing us how to choose what is best, not only when there is good and evil to choose from, but even when there are many choices that are good.

`Amr b. al-`As said: “An expert in Islamic Law is not someone who can merely distinguish between good and evil; he is one who can determine the better of two goods and the lesser of two evils.”

Allah also says: “If you fear Allah, Allah will endow you with a criterion.” This criterion resides in a person's heart and in his mind and is born of his knowledge and expertise. With it, he can distinguish between things and choose what is best, most perfect, and most noble in a way that others are unable to do.

The forth form of guidance is guidance that brings us near to Him in the eternal Paradise. Allah says: “We remove what is in his heart of rancor…” Therefore, the completion of guidance is only realized by the progression of a person to Paradise and nearness to his Lord.

When we ask Allah for guidance, we are asking for all of this.

In the subsequent chapters of this book, we will explore the various meanings implied by the “Straight Path” to which we ask to be guided.

The scholars of the Qur’ân have made various comments about the meaning of the verse “Guide us to the Straight Path.”

`Alî b. `Abî Tâlib and Ubayy b. Ka`b explained it to be a request to be made firm and constant on the Straight Path. Ibn `Abbâs said it was a request to be shown the way to the Straight Path or to be inspired to follow it. This covers all the different aspects of guidance that we have already mentioned.

The scholars also disagreed in how they expressed the meaning of the “Straight Path”. Some said it refers to the Qur'ân. Others, like Ibn Mas`ûd, al-Hasan, and Abû `Aliyah, said it refers to Islam. It is related that Ibn `Abbâs described it as “the path to Paradise”.

All of these descriptions are true. Ibn Taymiyah observes:

> All the commentators of the Qur’ân describe the Straight Path with some of its characteristics… Some of them describe the Straight path as Allah's Book or the act of following Allah's Book. Others say it is the religion of Islam. There are those who say it is the Sunnah and the community that follows the Sunnah. Some describe it as the path of worship or the path of placing one's love, fear, and hope in Allah and obedience to his commands and prohibitions. Others say that it is following the Qur’ân and Sunnah or obedience to Allah. The Straight Path is a name that embraces many characteristics.

From this we should be able to see that this verse encompasses many meanings. For the remainder of our discussion, we will explore this verse’s six overall meanings and their relevance to the issue of constancy and renewal.

CHAPTER TWO
The First Meaning of “Guide Us to the Straight Path”

The first meaning that the verse conveys is a request: our request to be made firm and constant on the Straight Path with all that it entails.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “The hearts of all human beings are between two fingers of the Merciful as if they are one heart. He moves them as He pleases.” [*Sahîh Muslim*]

This is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to ask in his supplications: “O mover of our hearts, move our hearts towards obeying You. O turner of our hearts! Turn our hearts towards Your religion.”

Anas asked the Prophet (peace be upon him): “O Messenger of Allah! We believe in you and in what you have brought. Then do you still fear for us?”

The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: “Yes. Our hearts are between two of Allah’s fingers. He moves them as He pleases.”

The Straight Path that we need to remain constant upon is the religion of Islam, so we must never desire any other religion. It is the Qur’ân, so we must never desire another Book. It is our faith, so we must never fall into unbelief. It is the Sunnah, so we should never fall into innovation.

The essential factors upon which we need constancy are the five pillars of Islam, the six pillars of faith, our ethical principles, and the basics of what is lawful and prohibited that

are clearly expressed in the Qur'ân and Sunnah and that are matters of consensus among the Muslims since the earliest days. A believer asks his Lord day and night in all of his prayers for constancy in these matters, since there is no room for doubt. He prays to his Lord to remain firm and unshaken in his conviction until the day that he meets with Him, since he knows that many people are in fact shaken in their faith from time to time.

The most precious thing that a Muslim possesses – that ensures his welfare in this life and his success in the Hereafter – is his faith.

CHAPTER THREE
The Second Meaning of "Guide Us to the Straight Path"

The second meaning that the verse conveys is our request to attain an increase in guidance. Allah says: "Allah increases the guidance of those who are guided."

As we have already discussed, a person does not receive full guidance all at once. Even the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not receive the revelation at once. The revelation came gradually until it ultimately reached its completion. The Prophet (peace be upon him) continued to worship Allah and grow in his certainty and devotion until the time of his death.

Allah says to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the Qur'ân: "Worship your Lord until that which is certain (death) approaches you."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Though my heart gets preoccupied, still I seek of Allah's forgiveness one hundred times a day." [*Sahîh Muslim*]

It is the duty of a person to seek after an increase in guidance. One consequence of this increase is contentment and tranquility in the heart. Abraham (peace be upon him) said: "My lord! Show me how you restore the dead to life."

Allah said to him: "Do you not believe?"

He said: "Yes, but I merely wish to settle my heart."

An increase in knowledge about matters of faith and matters of conduct is an increase in guidance. Allah says: "Whenever a chapter is revealed, some of them say: 'Which of you has had his faith increased by it?' Those who believe, their faith is increased and they rejoice. As for those in whose hearts is a disease, it will add foulness to their foulness and they will die in a state of unbelief."

We understand from this verse that when a believer hears a new verse of the Qur'ân, he believes in it and it increases his faith whereas a hypocrite when he hears it, it increases

his hypocrisy. Likewise, in the Qur'ân, Allah commands his Prophet (peace be upon him) to say: “O my Lord! Increase me in knowledge.”

Knowledge is not to be sought as an academic exercise. It is sought as a matter of faith. The earliest Muslims used to seek knowledge even when they were terminally ill. When Ahmad b. Hanbal was on his deathbed, he began to moan from the severity of the pain that he was suffering. Some of those who were with him said: “The moan is recorded.” (They were informing Ahmad that it is recorded that the moaning person is not patient in his affliction). Upon hearing this, Ahmad stopped moaning.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Third Meaning of “Guide Us to the Straight Path”

The third meaning that the verse conveys is our request to arrive at the right answer for matters wherein opinions differ and wherein people have different levels of understanding.

Among the supplications that the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to offer in his night prayer was the following: “O Allah! Lord of Gabriel, Michael, and Ariel! Creator of the heavens and the Earth! Knower of the Unseen and the manifest! You judge between your servants in what they disagreed about. Guide me, with your permission, to the truth in matters where people differ. Truly You guide whom You please to a Straight Path.” [*Sahîh Muslim*]

This supplication covers the first aspect of guidance, that of steadfastness and constancy, but it encompasses much more than that. It is a request for guidance in matters that are problematic. Scholars offer this supplication quite often when faced with a question about which they are uncertain or about which there is a lot of disagreement.

This form of guidance is in fact guidance to constancy, but it a type of constancy that does not always manifest itself with a constant, unchanging appearance. It is constancy in approach and methodology. It is the constancy of seeking guidance and remaining firm on the principles of Islam in all circumstances. It is the constancy of always seeking the truth. This is why we can say that one of the greatest constant principles in Islam is the principle of juristic discretion (*ijtihâd*), though *ijtihâd* is the force of change and renewal in Islamic Law.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “If a jurist engages in *ijtihâd* and is correct, he will have a double reward. If he engages *ijtihâd* and is incorrect, he will have a single reward.” [*Sahîh al-Bukhârî* and *Sahîh Muslim*]

Ijtihâd and Renewal

When a person puts his juristic discretion (*ijtihâd*) into practice, he seeks to go from what may be good to something that is better or from something that is less preferable to something that is good.

Abû Mûsâ al-Ash`arî related that he came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) while he was with a delegation of the Ash`arî people. He found that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was dividing up the livestock that were designated for charity. They asked to be able to ride some camels, but he refused, swearing an oath that he would not allow us to ride them, saying: "I do not have anything to let you ride." Later on, he received a quantity of camels brought from the spoils of war and said: "Where are the Ash`arî people?" Then he provided them with five camels.

Abû Musâ and the others remained close by, and Abû Mûsâ said to his companions: "Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) seems to have forgotten his oath. If we allow Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) to neglect his oath, we shall never prosper."

They returned to the Prophet (peace be upon him) and said: "O Messenger of Allah, we asked to mount the camels, and you swore an oath that you would not allow us to do so, so we thought that you may have forgotten your oath."

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Allah is the one who let you ride them. By Allah, if I swear an oath and then see what is better, then with Allah's grace, I will do what is better and perform expiation for my oath." [*Sahîh al-Bukhârî*]

Here we can see how the Prophet (peace be upon him) swore an oath to do one thing but then did another. From this we derive the following principle of Islamic Law: When a person believes something to be correct so much so that he swears by it but then realizes that something else is better – either because circumstances have changed or because new evidence has presented itself – then he should expiate for his oath and do what is better.

Al-Shâfi`î writes:

> We always take the final statement from the guidance of the Prophet (peace be upon him). We can see that after the Prophet (peace be upon him) arrived at Madînah, he initially preferred to emulate the people of the scripture in matters in which he had yet to receive revelation, hoping that they would accept Islam and hoping to win their hearts. Thereafter, he behaved differently than them. Being different than the people of the scripture and the polytheists became a principle of Islamic law that the Prophet (peace be upon him) commanded us to put into practice.

The second Caliph, `Umar b. al-Khattâb, wrote to Abû Mûsâ al-Ash`arî wherein he said:

> Do not let a verdict that you gave yesterday prevent you from following the truth today if you review the matter and are guided to what is more correct. The truth is timeless, and going back to the truth is better than persisting in falsehood.

Elsewhere in his letter to Abû Mûsâ, he writes:

> True understanding is to understand matters that disquiet the heart and are not addressed by Allah's Book or the Sunnah of His Prophet (peace be upon him). You must consider examples of similar cases and use analogous reasoning to apply a ruling to the matter at hand that already applies to other, similar matters.

Ibn al-Qayyim discusses `Umar's letter in his book entitled *I`lâm al-Muwaqqi`în*. He writes:

> This document is extremely important. The scholars have received it with total acceptance. They have used it to establish principles concerning jurisprudence, and court testimony. The letter is indispensable for governors and jurists who must consider it and the legal insights it contains.

Ibn al-Qayyim then goes on to discuss `Umar's advice to Abû Musâ not to allow the verdicts he issued yesterday prevent him from giving more correct verdicts today. He writes:

> He is telling him that if he issued a ruling on a matter based on juristic reasoning (*ijtihâd*) and then comes across the same matter again, his first ruling should not prevent him from looking into the matter anew. His view could possibly be different. His first ruling is no obstacle for him to change his mind and issue a new ruling if he deems it to be correct, since the truth is always to be preferred and takes priority over any falsehood.

`Umar put his own advice into practice. On one occasion, `Umar gave a ruling on a matter. Then, when the matter came up again, `Umar gave a different ruling. Someone said: "O Commander of the Faithful, a year ago you gave a different ruling."

`To this `Umar replied: "That was the ruling that we gave back then. This is the ruling we give today."

All the great jurists put this principle into practice, and this is the main reason why they prohibited their students from blindly following them. We can sometimes find recorded for Ahmad b. Hanbal seven different opinions on a single matter. Sometimes the matter had been addressed by the sacred texts. Nevertheless, considerations such as the authenticity of a hadîth, or how the texts were to be applied in a given situation, or the possibility of abrogation led him to different conclusions.

The same can be said for al-Shâfî`î. He had his "old school" that he formulated during his years in Iraq and his "new school" that he developed during the end of his life in Egypt.

Likewise, we see that the students of Abû Hanîfah disagreed with roughly two-thirds of their mentor's opinions.

When discussing the issue of *ijtihâd*, it is important for us to make a distinction between the pure teachings of our divinely revealed faith and the fruits or our weak and limited

intellects. We must not confuse our opinions, prejudices, and predilections with the clear and unambiguous teachings of our faith. Making this distinction is one of the hallmarks of our sincerity to Allah and His Messenger (peace be upon him) that keeps us from falling victim to our vain desires. One aspect of this is to abandon a previous juristic opinion that is weak for another opinion that is stronger and sounder. By doing so, we move from receiving one reward for our efforts to receiving a double reward – one reward for our efforts in ascertaining the truth and the other for actually attaining it.

This change of opinion can come in many facets of our thinking. I will discuss but a few.

1. There are issues relating to the means of achieving our goals. Our primary goal is something established for us by our faith – we want to call people to the worship of Allah alone and to adhere to the Qur'ân and Sunnah. We strive to attain Paradise and the pleasure of Allah. Many of the means that we employ to reach this goal are matters that fall under the domain of juristic discretion. They are not all set in stone. Some people might discover some effective means today that were unavailable to them before. Such means may not have even existed in the past or were simply not suitable before. These means change with the times and with changes in society or in the environment. However, they must remain within the realm of what is permissible in Islam.

2. There are issues relating to our approach. We can use various approaches to call people to Islam, some subtle and some direct. Noah (peace be upon him) said: "Further, I have spoken to them in public and secretly in private." [*Sûrah Nûh*: 9]

Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) called to Islam in Mecca secretly for three years. Thereafter, he declared Islam openly. We can say the same for other approaches, like leniency and sternness, generality and specificity, and individual instruction and public discourse. All of these approaches have their place. The approach that is most effective today may not work so well tomorrow. What is good for one society might prove ineffective elsewhere.

3. There are issues that relate to the details of Islamic Law as opposed to the indisputable essentials of faith and practice. These details are a vast field of knowledge wherein even Prophets have disagreed. It is well known how Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them both) disagreed with each other. The Companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) had disagreements. Abû Bakr and `Umar disagreed with each other about the prisoners of war and other matters right in front of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

The great jurists Abû Hanifah, Mâlik, al-Shâfi`î, and Ahmad disagreed as did the great scholars who came after them like al-Nawawî, Ibn Hajar, Ibn Taymiyah, and others. Today, scholars like Ibn Bâz and al-`Uthaymîn disagree with one another. We have to accept that people will disagree on such matters until the Day of Judgment. Such disagreement is not blameworthy as long as it is based on proper juristic reasoning grounded in an assessment of the available evidence and not based on vain desires or personal fancies.

4. There are extraordinary and unprecedented issues that confront us. These issues challenge our minds and can even bewilder us. However, this is an important area where *ijtihâd* must be employed. We see that Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them both) were faced with such a circumstance when the Children of Israel took a calf for worship. Each of these two Prophets had a different view on how to handle the situation, in spite of their both being Prophets and monotheists who condemned idolatry.

Aaron (peace be upon him) thought it sufficient to condemn what they were doing and bear patiently with them. When Moses (peace be upon him) came to know this, he became angry and pulled his brother by the head. Aaron (peace be upon him) said to him: "Do not take me by the beard or by my head. I feared lest you would say that I caused division among the Children of Israel and they would not obey me."

Therefore, part of what it means to ask for guidance is to ask to be shown what is better and most correct.

CHAPTER FIVE
The Fourth Meaning of "Guide Us to the Straight Path"

The fourth meaning that the verse "Guide us to the Straight Path" conveys is that of seeking guidance to the devotion and worship that we should exhibit in every circumstance.

A healthy person has devotions to perform using his strength and energy to please Allah. A sick person has other devotions in the way of patience, fortitude, acceptance, and supplication. A wealthy person gives in charity and offers thanks to his Lord. A poor person worships his Lord by being reconciled to his state and by being pleased with what his Lord has apportioned to him without harboring any envy against those to whom Allah has given more.

There are devotions to be offered from our strength as individuals, communities, nations, and as a global Muslim community. With such strength, we must defend and protect the Muslims and prevent vice and wrongdoing. There are devotions that we are responsible for when we are weak, including patience, nurturing hope, and thinking about how to better our state of affairs for Allah's sake.

There are different responsibilities in times of weakness than there are in times of strength. It is the duty of the Muslims to think and to plan, to assess and mobilize the little strength that they have, and to shrug off the weakness that plagues them. They must work for the future generations who will come after them, even if they cannot realize any immediate benefits for themselves.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Every worshipper goes through a period of intense fervor and that period then comes to an end.” He then observed some people going to enormous lengths in their worship of Allah and said: “That is the most intense and enthusiastic expression of Islam. Every period of such fervor has its duration of time that is followed by a milder period. If that milder period is one of moderation, correctness, and balance, then this is quite good. If that period is a period of sin, then it leads to destruction.” [*Musnad Ahmad*]

Here the Prophet (peace be upon him) is telling us that every time and circumstance has its expression of worship that suits it. Therefore, a believer must ask his Lord to guide him to the manner of devotion that best suits his particular time and circumstances. This same guidance is needed by the Muslims as a community and as a nation. Ibn Taymiyah writes:

> Every worshipper is forced constantly to supplicate and ask for guidance to the Straight Path. There is neither salvation from damnation nor any felicity except through this guidance. Whoever fails to attain it will be either among those upon whom is Allah’s wrath or among those who are astray. This guidance is only from Allah. Whomever Allah guides is rightly guided and whomever Allah leaves to stray will never find anyone to guide him. The Straight Path is to always, at every time, do what you are commanded at that particular time with both your knowledge and your works and to abstain from what you are forbidden. You continue to do this until your firm desire is to do what is right and you truly detest doing what is wrong.

Ibn Taymiyah explains to us here that right guidance at any given moment is according to the needs of the moment. We consequently need renewed guidance every day, every hour, and every moment of our lives. He also explains just how necessary this guidance is for us.

When we ask to be guided, we are seeking guidance to understand our every situation and circumstance so we may realize how to properly worship Allah at all times and under all conditions. We can never hope to know this except by the grace of Allah.

This is why the Prophet (peace be upon him) gave the following advice to Mu`âdh b. Jabal when he sent him to Yemen: “You are going to a people from among the people of the scripture, so the first thing towards which you should call them is to testify that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. If they obey you in this, then teach them that Allah has made compulsory upon them five prayers. Then if they obey you in this, teach them that there is charity to be taken from their wealthy people and given to their poor people...”

We can see in this that only when the people respond to one teaching are they to be presented with the next. People, as well as whole societies, need to be called to the truth gradually. Likewise, different people are to be approached in different ways. Some people are best approached from the angle of personal development. Others are more disposed to detailed academic discourses about Islamic Law and the meanings of the Qur’ân. Others are more concerned about politics and current affairs. Still others are best

approached through action. All of this must take into consideration the level of faith, knowledge, and readiness of those being addressed.

Allah says: “And We did not send any Messenger except with the language of his own people to make matters clear to them.”

The way of talking to different people varies depending on their level of understanding. They way we would address the people of a complex and highly developed civilization is going to be different than the way we would address the people of a simple and primitive society. Likewise, calling people to Islam in Europe places on us different demands and challenges than those we face when calling people to Islam in Africa or Asia.

The norms and idiosyncrasies of different societies pose even greater challenges. Each society has its own ideas, problems, and concerns and each must be addressed accordingly.

CHAPTER SIX
The Fifth Meaning of “Guide Us to the Straight Path”

The fifth meaning that the verse “Guide us to the Straight Path” conveys is that of being guided from what is already good and wholesome to what is even better.

Allah says: “Those who listen to the word and follow the best of it”

He also says: “Follow the best of what has come down to you from your Lord.”

In some aspects of Islamic Law, we are presented with choices. For instance, we have choices in how to expiate for our mistakes. In liability law, the injured party has a choice to take the blood money that is his right, but he also has the better option of pardon.

There are many good works that we can engage in where other works are even better. Our private worship is something most excellent but its benefit stops with ourselves. However, if we take some of this time to teach others or call them to Islam, we will still be engaging in an act of worship, but one that is far better, since it benefits a greater number of people. This is why the eminent scholars Mâlik and al-Zuhrî said: “Seeking knowledge is better than voluntary worship as long as the one doing so has correct intentions.” This is only because knowledge benefits everyone, whereas private devotions general benefit only those engaged in them.

This applies to societies and nations just as much as it applies to individuals. One nation may be inspired by Allah to engage in some good enterprise of particular benefit to itself. Another nation may be inspired to engage in something else of greater and more universal benefit. When such inspiration comes, it is important to act upon it and not

waste the opportunity. Moreover, what might be best in one situation might not be best in another.

CHAPTER SEVEN
The Sixth Meaning of “Guide Us to the Straight Path”

When we ask to be guided to the Straight Path, we ask to be shown what may not always be apparent to others.

For example, when a scholar of hadîth researches long and hard on the transmission of a hadîth, he may achieve absolute certainty that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had indeed made a particular statement, so much so that he is willing to swear by it. This level of certainty might not be achieved by someone else, not even by another scholar. This scholar has attained guidance in this matter, but it is of such a specific nature that he cannot require others to share in his certainty.

These, therefore, are the various forms of guidance that we ask for when we offer our prayers.

CONCLUSION
Reasons for Renewal

Finally, we might ask ourselves: What are the reasons for such renewal and diversity that requires us to perpetually seek renewed guidance?

There are actually many reasons for this.

1. There is the renewal that comes from taking a fresh look at juristic decisions. This can only be achieved by discarding bigotry, vested interests, and blind following. This requires objectivity and the ability to accept criticism and correction. Our opinions, in this way, can change for the better and our understandings and our actions can become more correct.

2. There is the renewal mandated by changing circumstances. Each situation and each environment has its own demands. A person engaged in Islamic work is like a merchant who displays his wares in the market. The difference is that the goods he has to offer are not the goods of this world but are far more precious. The merchant cannot be arbitrary in the way he sets prices, decides on what goods to present and how to present them, nor can he choose who his customers are going to be. If he really wants to sell his wares, he will have to adapt his approach to the changing demands of the market and use whatever strategies he must as long as they are in accordance with Islamic Law.

When we look at the behavior of nations, we see that their policies, allegiances, and legislations change in response to changing circumstances. Even the greatest nations and empires that desire world domination alter their policies and change their allegiances in response to the changing world in which they exist.

3. Experience provides us with greater knowledge and expertise. A person can only acquire such experience after long years immersed in patient work and astute observation.

`Ali b. Abî Tâlib was once asked: “Did Allah’s Messenger give anything to you – his household – that was especially for you?”

He replied: “No, and by Him who brings forth the produce from the Earth and created the human soul, nothing was given me except understanding that a person is given about Allah’s book.”

People are at different levels of knowledge and understanding. This applies to their understanding of Allah’s Book as well as to the contingencies of the world.

The state of the Muslim world today is definitely not the best it can be. It is far from the ideals of Islamic Law. Reform is needed and must be carried out according to the dictates of the Islamic teachings brought to us by Allah’s Messenger.

And Allah knows best.